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THE BRITISH POPULAR PRESS AND VENEREAL DISEASE DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR*

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ABSTRACT. *This article examines the role of the British popular press in the campaign against venereal diseases during the Second World War. Concern about the rapidly rising incidence of syphilis and gonorrhoea prompted the Ministry of Health to ask the press to carry a series of informative advertisements about VD, but the Newspaper Proprietors' Association refused to publish them until they had been made less explicit. A major controversy erupted in Fleet Street as the two most popular dailies, the* Mirror *and the* Express, *took opposing views about the suitability of 'family newspapers' educating the public about sexual health. While the* Express *refused to print even the edited VD advertisements, the* Mirror *broke away from the popular press's tradition of evasiveness on this issue and discussed the problem in unusual detail. The* Mirror*'s bold approach won widespread public support, with investigations by Mass-Observation and the Wartime Social Survey finding that information about VD was, in general, gratefully received by a public hungry for more knowledge about sex. Although many editors continued to treat the subject very cautiously, the article argues that the campaigns run by the* Mirror *and the Ministry of Health marked an important moment in the public discussion of sex and encouraged the belief that all citizens should be sexually informed.*

In February 1943 the Ministry of Health, alarmed at a 70 per cent rise in the incidence of venereal diseases in Britain since the start of the war, launched the most prominent information campaign on sexual health that had ever been overseen by a British government. Seeking to challenge the 'hush-hush' that it felt was hindering the containment of the problem, the Ministry, in conjunction with the Central Council of Health Education (CCHE), produced an advertisement entitled 'Ten plain facts about VD' for publication in the national press. The announcement explained the dangers posed by the diseases, described how to identify the signs of infection, and encouraged affected individuals to consult their doctor. The campaign was mired in controversy before it had even begun. The Newspaper Proprietors' Association (NPA) protested that the explicitness of the government's advertisement made it unsuitable for their readerships, and demanded that it be revised. Most newspapers accepted the announcement when vernacular phrases such as 'pox', 'clap' and 'sex organs' were removed, but even

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when these cuts had been made, Britain's best-selling daily paper, the *Daily Express*, refused to publish it. The *Express*'s main rival, the *Daily Mirror*, on the other hand, enraged at the way the adverts had been 'toned down to meet old-maidish newspaper susceptibilities',[1] printed an article headlined 'False modesty won't stop this disease' and exposed the process of sub-editing in full.[2] The divisions in Fleet Street about how sex should be discussed in the public arena were laid out for all to see.

This episode will be familiar to many historians of the period, having been recorded in several works to illustrate the prudishness of popular newspapers, but it has not yet received the full treatment that it deserves. The main focus of attention for those studying the wartime venereal diseases campaign has generally been either the activities of the government or the attitudes of the public (as revealed in surveys conducted by Mass-Observation both before and after the advertisements were placed).[3] The press's involvement in the campaign – and the controversy that it caused in Fleet Street – has not been examined in any real detail. It is worth exploring further because the extensive debates about how the problem of venereal disease should be handled forced editors to define unusually clearly their positions on the coverage of sex and on the responsibilities of newspapers to their readers; as a result, the generally unspoken assumptions and anxieties that shaped editorial decisions emerged into the open. The rich, if still very fragmentary, range of source material relating to this issue also provides a rare opportunity to observe and analyse elements of the whole of the newspaper process, from the writing of articles and advertisements to their reception by specific readers. The heated arguments about the venereal diseases campaign were, moreover, of long-term significance: by serving to entrench contrasting policies about appropriate sexual content in the two most popular dailies, the *Mirror* and the *Express*, they had an impact on press discourse for several years. In providing an analysis of the press response to the wartime rise in venereal disease, and placing it in its wider context, this article hopes to contribute to our understanding of both the place of the press in society and the changing portrayal of sex in popular culture.

This article begins by showing that despite a tendency to titillate readers with sensational court reports, popular newspapers in the early twentieth century took a cautious approach to many sexual issues because editors and proprietors were determined that their publications retain a certain level of 'respectability'. This caution is illustrated by demonstrating how limited the coverage of venereal

[1] *Daily Mirror*, 22 Feb. 1943, p. 4.

[2] *Daily Mirror*, 19 Feb. 1943, p. 3.

[3] J. Weeks, *Sex, politics and society: the regulation of sexuality since 1800* (Harlow, 1981), p. 216; R. Davenport-Hines, *Sex, death and punishment: attitudes to sex and sexuality since the Renaissance* (London, 1991), pp. 266–7; R. Porter and L. Hall, *The facts of life: the creation of sexual knowledge in Britain, 1650–1950* (New Haven, 1995), pp. 241–2; L. Hall, *Sex, gender and social change in Britain since 1880* (Basingstoke, 2000), pp. 134–5; L. Hall, 'Venereal diseases and society in Britain, from the Contagious Diseases Act to the National Health Service', in R. Davidson and L. Hall, eds., *Sex, sin and suffering: venereal disease and European society since 1870* (London, 2001), p. 131.

diseases was during the First World War. Some important developments in the inter-war period are then identified, including changes in sexual attitudes and practices, and in the newspaper market, in particular with the mid-1930s transformation of the *Daily Mirror*. The main body of the article analyses the campaign launched by the *Mirror* in August 1942 to educate the public about venereal diseases, showing that as well as consolidating the paper's growing reputation as an outspoken opponent of prudery and outdated social convention, it had a significant impact in raising awareness of the problem and tapped into a very real public hunger for more information about sex. Despite being encouraged by the Ministry of Health to follow suit, others in Fleet Street could not reconcile such sexually explicit material with their definitions of a 'family newspaper', and the article goes on to examine exactly where different editors drew the limits of decency and acceptability. The final section suggests that the press campaign against venereal diseases was an important moment in the public discussion of sex both because it encouraged the increasingly widespread belief that all citizens should be sexually informed and because it emboldened the *Mirror* and its sister paper the *Sunday Pictorial* to lead the way in devoting more space to the discussion of sexual issues in the post-war years. On the other hand, optimistic expectations that a short-lived campaign of public enlightenment could sweep away the deep-seated anxieties associated with venereal diseases would prove wildly unrealistic.

I

National newspapers enjoyed spectacular increases in their circulation and public prominence in the early decades of the twentieth century, a rise that predictably intensified concern about their effects on society. Although Sunday papers such as *Lloyd's Weekly News* and the *News of the World* had gradually built up mass readerships in the second half of the nineteenth century, it was only after the launch of the *Daily Mail* in 1896 that daily newspapers started reaching a similarly broad audience. A string of rival publications were started following the success of the *Mail*: the *Daily Express* was established in 1900, the *Daily Mirror* in 1903, the *Daily Sketch* in 1908, and the *Daily Herald* in 1912. The circulation of national newspapers doubled between the wars, so that by 1939 some two-thirds of the population regularly saw a daily paper, and almost everyone saw at least one Sunday newspaper.[4] Although newsprint rationing severely restricted the size of newspapers during the Second World War, sales continued to rise: the *Daily Express*, the most popular daily, sold more than two and a half million copies per day, while the *News of the World* sold over four million copies of every issue. Each

[4] Major G. Harrison with F. C. Mitchell and M. A. Abrams, *The home market* (London, 1939), ch. 21; A. P. Wadsworth, 'Newspaper circulations 1800–1954', *Manchester Statistical Society Transactions*, 4, session 1954–5; R. Williams, *The long revolution* (Harmondsworth, 1965), pp. 195–236.

copy sold was usually seen by at least three people, often as a result of being passed around the family.

This ubiquity meant that many viewed the popular press as having the power to corrupt society. Some of the most potent concerns revolved around the coverage of sex. There was a widespread fear in official and professional circles that sexual knowledge and erotic images could be dangerous in the 'wrong' hands (variously conceived of as belonging to the working classes, the young, the ill-educated, or women), and could induce immorality and a disastrous relaxation of social discipline. Popular newspapers, by reaching these supposedly impressionable groups, had the potential to cause significant damage. The press had, furthermore, a long history of exploiting public curiosity about sex. The establishment of the Divorce Court in 1857 had provided a convenient and regular source of titillating material for newspapers, while from the 1880s the pioneers of 'new journalism' caused controversy by conducting investigations and campaigns of their own on moral issues (the most notable example being W. T. Stead's articles on child prostitution sensationally serialized as 'The maiden tribute of modern Babylon').[5] As circulation increased in the twentieth century, public criticism of these strategies grew more urgent. Lord Robert Cecil's parliamentary campaign in the early 1920s to curb the intrusive and salacious reporting of divorce cases provided one focus for discontent with the press. The campaign – backed publicly by the Mothers' Union, and privately by King George V, who regarded the coverage of one trial in 1925 as 'discreditable and nauseating' and liable to have 'disastrous and far-reaching effects throughout all classes'[6] – eventually resulted in the passage of the Judicial Proceedings (Regulation of Reports) Act in December 1926 limiting newspapers to printing the bare details of the participants in divorce cases and the judge's summing-up.[7] The fact that Fleet Street accepted this restriction with relatively little protest suggests that editors and proprietors considered that it would be prudent to appease these vociferous opponents.

Yet if editors and proprietors of the popular press were conscious of an interest in sexual scandal, they were also very keen to maintain a sense of decency in their publications and to protect their status as 'family newspapers'. Lord Northcliffe, the founder of the *Mail* and the *Mirror*, was adamant that his papers were 'popular not vulgar'.[8] Aware of the scrutiny of moralizing critics, and fearful of alienating the more conservative readers and advertisers, editors pursued a cautious line on many sexual issues, being particularly evasive and euphemistic on subjects such as

[5] A. Humphries, 'Coming apart: the British newspaper press and the divorce court', in L. Brake, B. Bell, and D. Finkelstein, eds., *Nineteenth-century media and the construction of identities* (Basingstoke, 2000); G. Savage, 'Erotic stories and public decency: newspaper reporting of divorce proceedings in England', *Historical Journal*, 41 (1998), pp. 511–28; J. Walkowitz, *City of dreadful delight: narratives of sexual danger in late Victorian London* (Chicago, 1992), ch. 3.

[6] Lord Stamfordham to Viscount Cave, lord high chancellor, 6 Mar. 1925, London, the National Archives (NA), LCO/2/775.

[7] Savage, 'Erotic stories'.

[8] Northcliffe bulletins, 22 May 1921, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Eng. hist. d. 303–5.

homosexuality and abortion. When Isabel Hutton, a doctor, tried in the 1920s to secure press publicity for her sex education book, *The hygiene of marriage*, for example, the editor of a popular daily told her that 'we never touch sex stuff'.[9] Marie Stopes was repeatedly frustrated by the timidity of the national press in addressing the issue of birth control. Although birth control inevitably attracted some press coverage in the inter-war period, it was usually discussed in broad social and eugenic terms rather than as a personal matter, and few practical details were given. Clinics received little publicity, and birth control advertising was refused by all the national dailies except the Labour-supporting *Daily Herald*. Even the *Herald* changed its policy after being taken over by the commercial publishers Odhams in 1929.[10]

II

Venereal disease was another subject about which the popular press was reticent. Syphilis and gonorrhoea were both widespread and dangerous in Victorian and Edwardian Britain. There are few reliable national statistics, but the British Social Hygiene Council (BSHC) estimated in 1930 that there were around 50,000 new cases of syphilis per year in the period before the First World War, and substantially more gonorrhoeal infections.[11] Syphilis was certainly one of the main 'killing diseases' and was responsible for thousands of deaths every year. Despite the dangers of public ignorance, however, discussion of venereal diseases was very restricted in this period, as Richard Davenport-Hines has demonstrated at length; the subject was widely considered to be distasteful because of its strong associations with prostitution, sin, and punishment.[12] Advances in the diagnosis and treatment of syphilis in the early twentieth century – including the formulation of the powerful cure Salvarsan by Paul Ehrlich in 1910 – did encourage wider debate about government policies for combating the disease, and indeed the *Morning Post* and the *Daily Telegraph* played an important role in marshalling medical support for a royal commission, set up in 1913 under the chairmanship of Lord Sydenham. Popular newspapers continued to treat the topic with considerable circumspection, however. Both the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Mirror* referred to the establishment of the royal commission with headlines about the 'hidden plague', refusing to use the words 'venereal' or 'sexual', or to refer to syphilis and gonorrhoea by name. The *Daily Express* was even coyer, announcing an enquiry into 'certain contagious diseases'.[13]

The reaction of different sections of the press to the publication of the final report of the royal commission in 1916 highlights this caution very clearly. The report was certainly a newsworthy document, containing 'startling' details about

[9] Hall, *Sex, gender and social change*, p. 111.
[10] A. Bingham, *Gender, modernity and the popular press in inter-war Britain* (Oxford, 2004), pp. 156, 178–80.
[11] *Combating venereal disease*, The British Social Hygiene Council (1930), NA, FD 1/3166.
[12] Davenport-Hines, *Sex, death and punishment*, ch. 5.
[13] *Daily Mirror*, 12 Aug. 1913, p. 5; *Daily Mail*, 12 Aug. 1913, p. 5; *Daily Express*, 12 Aug. 1913, p. 1.

the incidence of the diseases: it suggested that some 10 per cent of the urban population had been affected by syphilis, with more affected by gonorrhoea. The commissioners argued that a comprehensive, nationwide network of clinics providing free, voluntary, and confidential treatment was needed to combat this serious threat to public health.[14] Almost all of the report's main recommendations were adopted by the government, and indeed they laid the foundations for government policy for the rest of the century.[15] The coverage of the report in the 'minority' newspapers accorded with its importance. *The Times*, for example, devoted over 2,300 words to summarizing the main findings, and analysed it further in an editorial.[16] Although the leading article had a sceptical tone in places, and included traces of the traditional view that the infected were sinners, the paper left little doubt that the problem was serious.

The *Daily Mail*, at that time the most popular daily newspaper with a circulation of just over one million copies, was by contrast far briefer in its coverage. 'Hidden plague as marriage ban' ran the headline to an article of less than half a column, with the focus on the commission's suggestion that those infected with 'sexual disease' should not be allowed to marry. Brief details of the report's main recommendations were provided, but the *Mail* again shied away from mentioning syphilis and gonorrhoea by name, as if these words would contaminate the rest of the page.[17] There was neither an editorial offering the paper's opinion on the issue, nor a follow-up feature in subsequent days. The *News of the World*, the most popular Sunday paper, provided rather fuller coverage of the report in two-thirds of a column, but renamed the commission's subject as 'social diseases', and followed the *Mail* in avoiding any reference to specific diseases.[18] Yet these articles were comprehensive in comparison with the *Daily Mirror* and the *Daily Express*, neither of which made any mention of the royal commission's report at all.[19] One of the main threats to the health of the family was evidently regarded as inappropriate for discussion in these 'family newspapers'.

The *Mail* continued to provide periodic reports on the subject, albeit very sketchy ones, throughout the rest of the war. Lord Northcliffe, the proprietor, clearly recognized his editor's hesitancy and provided encouragement. 'I am glad to see the paper has now the courage to mention the word "venereal"', he wrote in June 1916, 'and thus help to dispel a dangerous British hypocrisy on a matter that is greatly and increasingly troubling the Military authorities. They are more than ever anxious about the matter.'[20] Further letters and articles were published in the *Mail* during a publicity drive organized by the National Council for

[14] Royal commission on venereal diseases, *Final report*, Cmd 8189 (London: HMSO, 1916).

[15] D. Evans, 'Sexually transmitted disease policy in the English National Health Service, 1948–2000: continuity and social change', in Davidson and Hall, eds., *Sex, sin and suffering*, p. 238.

[16] *Times*, 3 Mar. 1916, pp. 6, 9.

[17] *Daily Mail*, 3 Mar. 1916, p. 3.

[18] *News of the World*, 5 Mar. 1916, p. 3.

[19] *Daily Mirror*, 3–10 Mar. 1916; *Daily Express*, 3–10 Mar. 1916.

[20] Northcliffe bulletins, 24 June 1916.

Combating Venereal Diseases (NCCVD) in October 1916, which was again ignored by the *Mirror* and the *Express*. The *Mail* employed the traditional press campaigning language of dramatic revelation and vigorous action – 'The New Crusade – Conspiracy of Silence Broken – Fighting a Social Evil' (in contrast, the *Manchester Guardian*'s report was soberly headlined 'Venereal Disease Problem – Ministers and the Demand for Notification').[21] It did not, however, offer any detailed information about the diseases themselves. The introduction of Defence of the Realm Regulation 40D in March 1918, making it illegal for a woman with communicable VD to solicit or to have intercourse with a serviceman, generated controversy throughout the press, but if newspapers were willing to discuss government policy, they continued to leave the task of educating the public about the precise nature of the problem to the local authorities and the NCCVD.[22]

In 1920 Kennedy Jones, one of Northcliffe's main lieutenants at the *Mail* who had become a Conservative MP, welcomed the 'considerable prominence' that venereal disease had been given in the press 'during the last two or three years', and suggested that 'undoubted good has ensued from the recent publicity'.[23] Yet Jones perhaps exaggerated the extent of the change of attitude, at least among the popular newspapers. In May 1920, for example, Northcliffe was once again expressing his dismay at the evasiveness of the *Mail*:

> A very unusual divorce case is bowdlerised … one of the basic facts was venereal disease, which is not mentioned in the *Daily Mail*. Ours is not, as some people in the office seem to think, the Children's Newspaper, and the more you suppress the fact about this disease, the more it will spread.[24]

If not the 'Children's Newspaper', however, Northcliffe equally did not want his paper to be too bold. Two weeks later he wrote to the editor again: 'As to the "Girl's Terrible Secret" I notice we use the word "gonorrhoea". I am glad to see that we have at length plucked up the courage to help to do good but I by no means desire these cases should be emphasised.'[25] The other popular dailies, apart from the Labour-supporting *Daily Herald*, continued to be even more cautious than the *Mail*. The gradual decline in the incidence of syphilis and gonorrhoea during the inter-war period provided an excuse for the subject to be avoided as far as possible. Indeed Robert Graves and Alan Hodge suggested that 'although the general taboo against the mention of venereal disease weakened' in the inter-war period, it remained 'a tabooed subject in the press'.[26]

[21] *Daily Mail*, 25 Oct. 1916, p. 3; *Manchester Guardian*, 25 Oct. 1916, p. 6.

[22] P. Levine, *Prostitution, race and politics: policing venereal disease in the British empire* (New York, 2003), pp. 163–5.

[23] K. Jones, *Fleet Street and Downing Street* (London, 1920), p. 242.

[24] Northcliffe bulletins, 12 May 1920.

[25] Northcliffe bulletins, 29 May 1920.

[26] R. Graves and A. Hodge, *The long-weekend: a social history of Great Britain 1918–1939* (first pub. 1940; Harmondsworth, 1971), p. 109.

III

Venereal disease did not reach a high place on the public agenda again until a sharp rise in the number of infections in the early years of the Second World War caused concern among health officials and doctors. Responses in the 1940s were inevitably different, however, for British society had altered in several significant ways since 1918. Women were by then enfranchised citizens and had a more prominent, if still very restricted, presence in public life and in parliament. It is notable that the VD legislation of the 1940s made greater efforts to be gender neutral than that of the First World War (although in practice it continued to be applied primarily to women). The decline in the birth-rate, evident in working-class families in the 1930s, reflected a heightened determination to control family size. Knowledge of contraception and sexual health was increasing gradually, and the sales of condoms rose dramatically in these years. While the propaganda activities of the NCCVD (from 1925 renamed the British Social Hygiene Council) may have had only a limited national impact, the treatment of venereal diseases continued to improve and there was greater access to disinfectants that prevented infection. Sex manuals, such as those by Marie Stopes and Theodore Van De Velde, sold many thousands of copies and placed a new emphasis on sexual pleasure within marriage.[27] Sex had also become more visible in popular culture, evident in the glamour and 'sex appeal' of Hollywood cinema, in popular fiction such as E. M. Hull's 'desert romance' *The Sheik*, in the pin-up photography of *Men Only* and the feature pages of women's magazines.[28] Although the impact of these changes should not be exaggerated, and ignorance about sex remained very common, policy-makers such as Sir Weldon Dalrymple-Champneys at the Ministry of Health certainly believed that social conditions had altered significantly since the First World War.[29]

These shifts in sexual mores would not necessarily have been immediately apparent from an examination of most popular papers. Although the commercialized glamour of Hollywood had assumed a prominent place in newspaper columns, serious sexual issues generally continued to be approached tentatively at the end of the 1930s. The main signs of change were to be found in the *Daily Mirror* and the *Sunday Pictorial*. The *Mirror* and the *Pictorial* were both losing readers in the early 1930s when they were dramatically reinvented by the newly appointed editorial director Harry Guy Bartholomew ('Bart'), the young Welsh journalist Hugh Cudlipp, and Northcliffe's nephew Cecil King. Both papers were targeted more directly at a young, working-class audience, and developed a

[27] Davenport-Hines, *Sex, death and punishment*, pp. 246–9; H. Cook, *The long sexual revolution: English women, sex, and contraception, 1800–1975* (Oxford, 2004), chs. 5, 8.

[28] B. Melman, *Women and the popular imagination in the twenties: flappers and nymphs* (Basingstoke, 1988); J. Greenfield, S. O'Connell, and C. Reid, 'Fashioning masculinity: *Men Only*, consumption and the development of marketing in the 1930s', *Twentieth Century British History*, 10 (1999), pp. 457–76; Hall, *Sex, gender and social change*, p. 108; C. L. White, *Women's magazines, 1693–1968* (London, 1970), pp. 107–10.

[29] Davenport-Hines, *Sex, death and punishment*, p. 266.

brasher and more irreverent style. Their traditional support for the Conservative party was abandoned, and they positioned themselves as champions of a rising generation critical of out-dated social conventions and political complacency.[30] During the Second World War, the circulation of both papers rocketed, the *Mirror*'s rising well above two million copies and the *Pictorial*'s over three million; they perfected a formula of snappy war coverage, outspoken criticism of official incompetence (which led to the *Mirror* being threatened with suppression by the government in March 1942), and daring sexual content.

Sexual content had a central place in the new strategy. Bartholomew, Cudlipp, and King believed that Fleet Street's reticence on many sexual topics was unnecessary and old-fashioned. If papers like the *Mail* and the *Express* had aimed to be 'popular not vulgar', the *Mirror* and the *Pictorial* now portrayed themselves as 'vulgar but honest'.[31] The *Mirror* and the *Pictorial* sought to discuss sex using modern language and presentation, rejecting the lurid court reporting of the *News of the World* in favour of a diet of chatty features, titillating pictures, earnest crusades and informative problem columns. One prominent symbol of the new style was the *Mirror*'s Jane cartoon. Launched in December 1932 as a satire on a guileless 'bright young thing', the cartoon became gradually saucier, until by the war years Jane frequently shed her clothes and had become one of the favourite pin-ups among servicemen.[32] While the *Mirror* portrayed such material as cheeky fun, in the style of the seaside postcard, many in Fleet Street were appalled. Even before the war, one of the *Mirror*'s main rivals, the *Daily Sketch*, tried to orchestrate a moral backlash by running a 'Clean and Clever' campaign denouncing these supposedly pornographic tendencies and demanding a return to a more principled style of journalism.[33] With the *Mirror*'s circulation continuing to grow, however, the *Sketch*'s crusade soon petered out ignominiously.

IV

The precise reasons behind the *Mirror*'s decision to launch a crusade on the dangers of venereal disease in August 1942 remain unclear. The problem was certainly an increasing priority by that time among officials at the Ministry of Health and the CCHE (which had recently taken over the organization of health education and propaganda from the BSHC), not only because of the rising rates of infection, but also due to the pressure exerted by the US Army, who were concerned at the lack of public information on the issue.[34] The Ministry of Health was quick to associate itself with the *Mirror*'s campaign, and the paper made clear that it had government support on the issue.[35] Nevertheless, Cecil King's

[30] On this reinvention, see H. Cudlipp, *Publish and be damned!* (London, 1953); idem, *At your peril* (London, 1962); idem, *Walking on water* (London, 1976).

[31] Hugh Cudlipp to Cecil King, 27 May 1960, Cardiff University, Bute Library, Cudlipp papers, HC/2/2.

[32] A. Saunders, *Jane: a pin-up at war* (London, 2004).

[33] Cudlipp, *Publish and be damned!*, pp. 115–19; *Daily Sketch*, 23 June 1938, p. 2.

[34] Davenport-Hines, *Sex, death and punishment*, p. 266.

[35] *Daily Mirror*, 19 Aug. 1942, p. 1.

observation in a private letter to Hugh Cudlipp in November 1942 that the Ministry of Health had 'taken up' the *Mirror*'s campaign without proper acknowledgement suggests that the Ministry was not itself the instigator.[36] Bartholomew later made a similar claim to the royal commission on the press, arguing that 'We gave columns in our paper for three weeks before the government made any effort to launch the campaign.'[37] The evidence suggests that the decision was taken by 'Bart' for journalistic reasons rather than as the result of external pressure.[38] The campaign certainly fitted in with the general direction of the paper at the time, which was to present itself as the outspoken voice of the people, opposed to prudery and bureaucratic obfuscation. The subject also provided serious material with which to counter-balance the titillation of the cartoons and photographs. Here was an issue on which the *Mirror* could demonstrate the social benefits of its new sexual frankness.

The *Mirror*'s crusade against venereal diseases started rather uncertainly on 8 August 1942, when feature-writer Elizabeth Rowley wrote an article calling for action against the 'white slave traffic' in London and 'its accompanying diseases'.[39] Rowley's linking of these two very different problems was not particularly helpful, for the assumption that prostitution was the main source of venereal infection was indicative of an old-fashioned outlook that overlooked the long-term decline of prostitution and underestimated the increasing significance of other forms of extra-marital sexual contact. When the *Mirror* returned to what it described as 'the forbidden topic' in an editorial two days later, the leader-writer wisely narrowed the focus to the spread of venereal disease and made no reference to prostitution. Observing that the earlier article 'has achieved a good deal of attention', the author used the crusading rhetoric that would be repeated frequently over coming weeks:

> Nice people may have been shocked by it. We hope they were. We are convinced that a dangerous situation in regard to the health of our people and the future of our race has arisen, and that the remedy can only be found in the utmost frankness. The veil of prudery and so-called good taste must be torn aside from this subject. It is imperative that the facts be made known, and the public called upon to assist in a campaign of systematic eradication.[40]

The *Mirror* itself had previously been one of the worst offenders in terms of evading the issue, and this crusade provided an opportunity to demonstrate to readers that the reinvention of the paper over the recent years had been genuine and far-reaching. The paper had increased the directness of its titillating features,

[36] Cecil King to Hugh Cudlipp, 25 Nov. 1942, Cudlipp papers, HC 2/1.

[37] Royal commission on the press, *Minutes of evidence*, Day 22, Cmd 7398 (London: HMSO, 1948), p. 12.

[38] See also Cecil King to Hugh Cudlipp, 23 Sept.? 1942; King to Cudlipp, 25 Feb. 1943, Cudlipp papers, HC 2/1.

[39] *Daily Mirror*, 8 Aug. 1942, p. 4.

[40] *Daily Mirror*, 10 Aug. 1942, p. 3.

so there was a certain degree of consistency in a similarly open approach to sexual problems: sex was simply being pushed up the press's agenda.

Yet for all its rhetoric of shocking the 'nice' sections of society, the *Mirror* was far from challenging underlying notions of appropriate sexual behaviour, as the sermonizing at the end of this editorial made clear. 'Let no one be afraid to speak out boldly on the spiritual side', the paper declared. 'Moral values have been falling rapidly of recent years, and it is time that the real cause of the "social evil" should be stated for what it is.'[41] These sentiments struck many in Fleet Street as being deeply hypocritical. For the editorial teams of the *Express* and the *Sketch* in particular, the *Mirror* itself was a prime example of the moral decline and the obsession with sex that appeared to be fuelling promiscuity. Arthur Christiansen, the *Express* editor, believed that the rest of the *Mirror*'s content rendered a campaign against venereal diseases little short of ridiculous. 'It is wonderful how solicitous the *Daily Mirror* is for the [servicemen]', he remarked acidly to his former colleague Tom Driberg in March 1943. 'They work up their sex desires by publishing sexy pictures in the overseas edition, and campaign against VD in preparation for their return.'[42] The *Mirror*'s editors were clearly unselfconscious about this juxtaposition, for several of the main articles on the diseases were published on the very same page as the Jane cartoon. Yet even if Christiansen's charge of a confusion of purpose was justifiable, the only alternative he offered was silence and complicity in continued public ignorance.

The response to the initial articles encouraged the *Mirror* to develop them into a full-blown crusade. Letters of complaint, which Bartholomew had been expecting, simply failed to appear in any great numbers: only two were received in the first weeks of the campaign.[43] The letters that were received in fact demonstrated 'the crying need for public enlightenment on this subject'.[44] By 19 August, in its fourth major article on venereal disease in eleven days, the paper triumphantly declared on its front page that the Ministry of Health had decided to support its efforts to raise awareness of the problem.[45] It also announced that it had commissioned a series of eight articles from a specialist 'in charge of important VD clinics', writing under the pseudonym of Dr Glenn, to provide an expert summary of information about recognition and treatment of infections. In contrast to the First World War, the *Mirror* assumed the role of an educator on sexual health; not content with drawing attention to the issue, it actually sought to provide specific information about each of the main diseases.

Dr Glenn's weekly series, covering syphilis, gonorrhoea, and soft sore, was undoubtedly the most detailed exposition yet published in the popular press on the subject. It was so popular that extra columns were included in which Glenn could reply to misguided correspondents, and the articles were later collected in a pamphlet entitled *Ignorance must end*, sold by the paper for

[41] Ibid. [42] Christiansen to Driberg 8 Mar. 1943, Oxford, Christ Church, Driberg papers, E1.
[43] Cecil King to Hugh Cudlipp, 23 Sept.? 1942, Cudlipp papers, HC 2/1.
[44] *Daily Mirror*, 17 Aug. 1942, p. 3. [45] *Daily Mirror*, 19 Aug. 1942, p. 1.

3*d*.[46] Yet if the explicitness of the advice was unusual, the accompanying moral sentiments were familiar. While identifying the prostitute as responsible for much of the spread of infection, he also argued that in 'the years since the last war, there has been an undoubted increase of promiscuous sexual intercourse among young people' which had done much to widen the dangers. Glenn's prescription was simple: 'Married men should remain faithful to their wives, and single men should remain chaste.' Those men who sought intercourse before marriage not only lacked respect for their partner, he claimed, they lacked self-respect. He criticized the notion that continence was damaging to the health.[47] Traditional notions of sexual difference were evident in his suggestions that 'it is much easier for a woman to be continent than a man' and that 'while it is recognised that men have a physical urge for intercourse, a woman is not conscious of it until it has been aroused';[48] nevertheless, he advocated a single, high, moral standard whereby men maintained their celibacy until marriage. The best evidence that this was possible was to be found 'in the number of magnificently healthy young men in the Forces, who have their ideals – and the good sense and self-control to pursue them'.[49]

Although at times Glenn seemed to assume a male reader, the campaign was explicitly directed at both men and women. Women certainly wrote in requesting advice.[50] The *Mirror* traditionally had a large female readership, and although the reinvention of the paper had reduced the proportion of female to male readers, a 1943 survey found that 49 per cent of *Mirror* readers were female, which was still a slightly higher proportion than most of its competitors.[51] The *Mirror* underlined its support for educating women about sex when discussing the Markham committee's report on the women's services in September 1942. This report was the product of a committee set up by the government to investigate the persistent rumours of promiscuity among women in the ATS and other military services – part of a wider set of anxieties about 'good-time girls' in these years.[52] The committee, chaired by Violet Markham, comprehensively refuted charges of immorality, but argued that sex education in the women's services was inadequate. 'The *Daily Mirror* campaign for a saner and more open outlook in dealing with venereal disease receives strong corroboration' trumpeted the paper's front-page article. The *Mirror* applauded the absence of 'mawkish sentiment' in the Markham report and agreed that women needed to be as fully informed as men about threats to their sexual health.[53] Women, in general,

[46] E.g., *Daily Mirror*, 31 Aug. 1942, p. 6; 5 Sept. 1942, p. 6; pamphlet advertised 1 Mar. 1943, p. 7.
[47] *Daily Mirror*, 20 Aug. 1942, p. 7.
[48] *Daily Mirror*, 31 Aug. 1942, p. 6.
[49] *Daily Mirror*, 20 Aug. 1942, p. 7.
[50] *Daily Mirror*, 31 Aug. 1942, p.6.
[51] Cudlipp, *Publish and be damned!*, p. 122. A Mass-Observation survey in 1942 actually found the female readership to be 58 per cent: File Report 1420, Sept. 1942, p. 9, Oxford, Bodleian Library, X. Films 200.
[52] S. Rose, 'Sex, citizenship, and the nation in World War II Britain', *American Historical Review*, 103 (1998), pp. 1147–76.
[53] *Daily Mirror*, 3 Sept. 1942, pp. 1, 4.

possessed less sexual knowledge than men, so the *Mirror*'s emphasis on this point was significant.[54]

By the time that Dr Glenn's articles concluded on 8 October, a substantial amount of information and advice had been offered to the millions of *Mirror* readers. It was becoming increasingly clear that there was widespread support for an official campaign of public education on venereal diseases: the popular liberal daily *News Chronicle* published in mid-September the results of a Gallup poll showing 79 per cent of the public in favour of a network of bureaux to disseminate advice on VD.[55] The chief medical officer, Sir Wilson Jameson, was certainly sympathetic to the desire to improve access to health information. He was already using his monthly press conferences to emphasize preventative aspects of medicine, and he had also worked to give health broadcasts on the radio a greater prominence: in May 1941 he went on the radio to launch a high-profile campaign to encourage immunization against diphtheria. On 23 October 1942 he responded to the signs of public concern about VD by delivering on the BBC Home Service 'perhaps the most famous broadcast of his career', on the subject of 'Tuberculosis, Venereal Diseases and the Public'. In similar language to the *Mirror* he spoke of his determination that society 'shall no longer tolerate this hush-hush attitude regarding venereal diseases', but unlike Dr Glenn he largely evaded questions of morality. Coupling the issue of VD with that of tuberculosis helped him to achieve this, and he argued forcefully that the former posed 'just the same sort of problem as any other infectious disease such as smallpox, diphtheria, measles or typhoid fever.' The broadcast was praised by the *British Journal of Venereal Diseases* as an 'outstanding event in the history of the venereal diseases campaign and of broadcasting'.[56] It paved the way for further radio programmes, with the BBC making VD an official campaign in April 1943 and aiming to produce a relevant broadcast every month.[57]

Jameson followed his radio programme with a press conference that obtained wide coverage. The issuing of Regulation 33B on 10 November, providing for compulsory examination and treatment of anyone suspected of having infected two or more people, generated controversy and further discussion in the press. Nevertheless, as Tom Driberg told the House of Commons, newspaper reports 'have mostly consisted merely of quoting some distinguished personage as saying that we must "lift the veil of secrecy". Very few have contained any practical advice, information, or instruction to the citizen.'[58] The *Mirror* continued to stand alone in the depth of the coverage it gave the problem.

[54] K. Fisher, '"She was quite satisfied with the arrangements I made": gender and birth control in Britain, 1920–1950', *Past and Present*, 169 (2000), pp. 161–93; E. Roberts, *A woman's place: an oral history of working-class women, 1890–1940* (Oxford, 1984), ch. 3.

[55] *News Chronicle*, 16 Sept. 1942, p. 1; 18 Sept. 1942, p. 2.

[56] N. Goodman, *Wilson Jameson* (London, 1970), pp. 86–90, 190–4.

[57] S. Nicholas, *The echo of war: Home Front propaganda and the wartime BBC, 1939–1945* (Manchester, 1996), pp. 95–8.

[58] Parliamentary debates (House of Commons) 385, col. 1862, 15 Dec. 1942.

The *Mirror*'s approach was vindicated by a detailed survey of public attitudes to venereal disease conducted by Mass-Observation in London in early December 1942. This survey revealed a 'great willingness and often active desire to know more about VD, and to have the whole problem brought out into the open'. Less than a quarter displayed embarrassment at being questioned on the topic. The press coverage had clearly made a substantial impact: three-quarters of the sample had read something about venereal diseases in a newspaper, with 67 per cent of men, and 94 per cent of women, approving of this publicity.[59] These figures, Mass-Observation remarked, were 'indicative of the high degree of interest the subject of VD has aroused'. Closer investigation revealed that it was indeed the *Mirror* that was responsible for this impressive recognition rate:

> Though no specific question was asked as to where people had read articles about VD, it transpired that most of them had either read the whole series in the *Daily Mirror*, or been shown one or two articles on VD in that paper. Only a few had seen something on VD in any other paper, usually in connection with [Regulation] 33B.[60]

The survey underlined that the hunger for more sexual knowledge was fed by widespread ignorance. If there was a greater access to information about sex in the 1940s than there had been during the First World War, many remained unaware of even basic facts about the body, sex, and sexuality.[61] Some women told Mass-Observation that they had never heard of venereal diseases until they read about them in the press; more generally the organization found a 'welter of half-knowledge and superstition' which at times could be more dangerous than complete ignorance (such as the belief that intercourse with a virgin could cure a venereal infection).[62] The *Mirror* series had clearly been well pitched, particularly for the female readership. One working-class woman, for example, told the investigators that the articles 'gave you a lot of knowledge and they weren't abusive and make you feel uncomfortable. They'll make people take more interest in the subject if they are all written like that.'[63] The significantly higher approval rates of the press coverage among women than men was perhaps a reflection of the fact that women often had fewer sources of information about sex and sexual health, and appreciated readily available newspapers addressing these issues. A number of men, on the other hand, felt threatened that this information was being put into the hands of women and children. Some protested that the articles were 'entirely out of place' or that they did not 'like the idea in a family newspaper'; another thought it 'disgraceful that any national newspaper should discourse on this subject'.[64] Readers with these views were well catered for by the *Daily Express* and the *Daily Mail*.

[59] Mass-Observation file report 1573, Jan. 1943, pp. 1–2.

[60] Ibid., further notes, p. 3.

[61] Cook, *Long sexual revolution*; Fisher, 'Gender and birth control'; Roberts, *A woman's place*, ch. 3; S. Humphries, *A secret world of sex – forbidden fruit: the British experience, 1900–1950* (London, 1988).

[62] Mass-Observation file report 1599, Feb. 1943, pp. 2–3.

[63] Mass-Observation file report 1573, notes, p. 1.

[64] Ibid., p. 2.

V

The tensions in Fleet Street about the coverage of the venereal disease problem finally came to the surface in the early months of 1943 as the government started to put pressure on newspapers to devote space to the issue. In a memo to regional health officers in January 1943, Sir Wilson Jameson emphasized that he attached 'considerable importance' to the efforts to educate the public about venereal diseases, and encouraged them to place suitable articles in local newspapers.[65] The Treasury then approved a twelve-month campaign in which a series of informative advertisements would be published in all major national and provincial newspapers.[66] When the draft copy of this advertisement was placed before the NPA, however, there were serious divisions, with three main groups of opinion being formed. Those declaring their willingness to publish the advertisement as it stood included the representatives of the *Mirror*, the *Manchester Guardian*, and some other provincial papers; against them were ranged several papers, headed by the Express Group, that refused to publish the advertisement at all; and in the middle a broad group that agreed that it was 'too outspoken' and that 'one or two words should be deleted'.[67] The edited version that the majority of papers agreed upon, and which was accepted by the Ministry of Health, had indeed been amended only slightly – but the changes significantly hampered the overall impact of the announcement.

Three main alterations were made by the NPA copy sub-committee. The first was to remove from the section identifying the main venereal diseases as syphilis and gonorrhoea the sub-clause 'vulgarly known as pox and clap'. Popular newspapers had been forced to drop their traditional euphemisms such as the 'hidden scourge' and 'social diseases' in favour of the correct medical terms, but by refusing to include the vernacular names of these infections as well the press substantially increased the likelihood of confusion among the working-class audience; as *The Lancet* observed, a 'barricade of unfamiliar terms' could be almost as impenetrable to many of the people the advert was designed to reach as 'a barricade of silence'.[68] The second amendment, in a section warning that 'Professional prostitutes are not the only source of infection', was the removal of the sentences 'Venereal disease contracted through irregular sex alliance is spread to innocent partners. An infected man may give the disease to his wife, who, in turn, may infect her unborn baby.' As the possibility of syphilis being passed on to an unborn child had already been mentioned, and a warning already made that 'Any free and easy sex behaviour must mean a risk of infection', this cut did not so much alter the meaning as remove an emphasis which was clearly felt to threaten the sensibilities of some readers. The third, and most damaging, piece of editing came at the end, in a section describing the symptoms of infection. Whereas the original had made clear that 'The first sign of syphilis is a

[65] Sir Wilson Jameson to regional health officers, 8 Jan. 1943, NA, MH 55/1341.
[66] Minutes of third meeting of Joint Committee on VD (JCVD), 10 Aug. 1943, NA, MH/55/2325.
[67] *Newspaper World*, 27 Feb. 1943, pp. 17, 19.
[68] *Lancet*, 27 Feb. 1943, p. 246.

small ulcer on or near the sex organs', the revised version removed the reference to the 'sex organs' to leave the bald assertion that 'The first sign of syphilis is a small ulcer.' One 'advertising personality' in Fleet Street condemned this final modification as being 'nothing short of criminal' and likely to cause 'unnecessary worry to the uneducated'.[69] By suggesting that any ulcer could be regarded as a sign of syphilis, the advertisement in its final form risked provoking the sort of alarm and fear that officials were keen to avoid. Nevertheless, rather than see the announcement rejected, the Ministry agreed to the changes.[70] In Scotland, the final sections describing symptoms were omitted altogether: this cut was made at the recommendation of the Department of Health for Scotland, before any intervention by the Scottish press themselves. Those papers sending editions over to Ireland were forced to remove the announcement altogether, and replace it with other advertising.[71]

The launch of the first wave of advertising on 19 February 1943 was thus shrouded in controversy. The *Daily Mirror* vented its anger by making public the disagreements and attacking the process by which 'the announcement was toned down, and the stark red warning of danger changed to an inoffensive pink'. Showing that it would not be bound by the decisions of the NPA, it 'startled Fleet Street'[72] by printing the original versions of the edited sections of the advert. Under a cartoon by Zec portraying a burly workman chopping through the dark undergrowth of 'Sex Ignorance and Diseases', it set out what it considered to be the duties of a campaigning newspaper faced with caution and vacillation:

> The *Daily Mirror* has, on certain occasions, shocked public opinion, and will not hesitate to do so again. The truth on ugly subjects is seldom popular. Those who tell the truth are often regarded as having done something scandalous. So it had been with this newspaper, when our only offence has been to speak boldly in advance of conventional ideas. As time goes on, however, people come to recognize that what has been said was necessary in the public interest.[73]

The *Mirror* was clearly seeking to establish the paper's radical credentials by defining itself against the 'nice people' who 'are so easily offended'. But this is not to downplay the genuine significance of the *Mirror*'s willingness to stand alone in Fleet Street; indeed, the dispute with the NPA rekindled the paper's interest in the campaign and there was a flurry of further articles on the subject in subsequent days.

In the opposite corner, the *Daily Express* remained silent. Along with the *Sunday Express*, *The Observer*, the *Yorkshire Evening Press*, and a number of Scottish papers including the *Glasgow Citizen*, it simply refused to print the announcement even in its edited form.[74] Maintaining its reputation as a respectable 'family newspaper', suitable for all, was as important to the *Express* editorial team as cultivating a

[69] *Newspaper World*, 27 Feb. 1943, p. 19.
[70] *Daily Mirror*, 19 Feb. 1943, p. 3.
[71] *Newspaper World*, 27 Feb. 1943, p. 17.
[72] *World's Press News*, 25 February 1943, p. 12.
[73] *Daily Mirror*, 19 Feb. 1943, p. 3.
[74] *Newspaper World*, 27 Feb. 1943, p. 17.

crusading image was to that of the *Mirror*, and this advertisement seemed to conflict with the policy on 'cleanliness' that had been laid down by Lord Beaverbrook. As E. J. Robertson, the chairman of Express Newspapers, explained to the royal commission on the press in 1948, the proprietor insisted that they should 'always make the paper clean in the sense that no pornography should be in; keep all salacious things out. Our test is that our papers should be such that we should never be ashamed of our daughters reading them, and I defy anybody to find anything that we have done contrary to that rule.'[75] The paper suggested to the NPA that newspapers were not the best means of conveying information on venereal diseases: 'legislation and health talks to the Forces' were put forward as 'alternative and superior methods of combating the evil'. It is revealing that one of the few mentions of venereal diseases in the *Express* in this period was to report the archbishop of Canterbury's speech that the moral aspect of the venereal disease problem was more important than the medical one.[76] The editorial team clearly shared this view, and regarded an untargeted information campaign with little moral guidance as potentially dangerous. The *Express* was representing those people who told Mass-Observation of their concern that 'by removing the taboo on sex and regarding venereal disease in the light of an ordinary ailment, they feared that illicit intercourse would now take place more frequently as shame and horror of the possible consequences were removed'.[77]

Other popular papers sought to find a middle line between the positions of their rivals. The *Daily Mail* used its front page to underline the novelty of the advertisement – 'An announcement of a kind which has never before appeared in the *Daily Mail* is in Page Four to-day' – and justified its decision to accept it with the argument that 'by making known its perils and the steps taken to deal with them help is being given towards mitigating this scourge'. By using the headline, 'A Health Ministry announcement', however, the paper was retaining a certain distance and pre-empting complaints from more conservative readers.[78] The *Daily Herald* and the *News of the World*, meanwhile, included the advertisement without any comment.

Faced with a range of responses in Fleet Street, the trade press firmly supported the stance of the *Mirror*. *Newspaper World* accused those publications that had refused the Ministry of Health's advertising of being 'ostrich-like' and of 'misjudging the public reaction to the Government's courageous step'.[79] Likewise the *World's Press News* applauded the *Mirror*'s 'sensible viewpoint that newspapers can do much to enlighten the public on a danger which is increasing alarmingly', and the celebrated columnist Hannen Swaffer mocked the Beaverbrook Press's readiness to appeal to its status as a 'family newspaper' as a rationale for refusing the ads.[80] The *Express* was exposing itself to ridicule on the moral high ground.

[75] Royal commission on the press, *Minutes*, Day 16, Cmd 7364, p. 29.
[76] *Daily Express*, 27 Feb. 1943, p. 3.
[77] Mass-Observation file report 1633, p. 3.
[78] *Daily Mail*, 20 Feb. 1943, p. 1.
[79] *Newspaper World*, 6 Mar 1943, p. 6.
[80] *World's Press News*, 25 Feb. 1943, p. 12; 8 Apr. 1943, p. 4.

The controversy did not subside quickly. Little more than a week into the campaign, the Ministry of Information told newspapers that the sub-edited version of the advertisement was 'liable to cause misery and misunderstanding through not stating clearly the symptoms', and suggested that the phrase 'reproductive organs' could be substituted for the words 'sex organs' that had been expunged from the original. The NPA, realizing that consensus was now unlikely in Fleet Street, left individual editors to decide for themselves. Some papers, including the *Mirror* and *The Times*, now decided to print the original 'sex organs' in the new version of the advertisement, entitled 'VD – plain speaking'.[81] Others, including the *News Chronicle*, the *Herald*, the *News of the World*, and the *People*, accepted the Ministry's recommendation and chose the term 'reproductive organs', while the *Daily Mail* refused to accept either phrase and continued to print the original, misleading, copy.[82] The powerful anxieties caused by sexual terminology were once again underlined. The fifth advertisement in the series provoked another row. Headlined 'I was too frightened', it was in the form of a letter written by a young man telling of his concern for the safety of his new wife, whom he feared he might have infected with an old case of gonorrhoea that he had been afraid to have treated at the time. Unhappy at the 'fear angle' of this announcement, several papers that had accepted previous advertisements now rejected it, or insisted on making modifications, including the *Daily Mail*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Times*, and the *Daily Sketch*.[83] The *Mirror* printed it regardless, while the *Express* maintained its policy of refusing all advertising on the subject.

These obstructions from Fleet Street were deeply frustrating for health officials who wanted newspapers to play a far more active role in educating the public. The Ministry of Health's joint committee on venereal diseases, chaired by Sir Weldon Dalrymple-Champneys, observed in August 1943 that 'the press though prepared to accept the paid advertisements as a measure of national service are not enthusiastic in devoting more space to the subject'.[84] This committee agreed that this was a missed opportunity, especially in light of the evidence that the advertising campaign had made a powerful impact. An investigation conducted by Wartime Social Survey for the Ministry of Information found that 86 per cent of the public had seen the VD announcements in the press, and 92 per cent approved of the publicity. The survey also revealed that 'Those who had read the statement consistently showed more knowledge of the subject than those who had not'; indeed, 36 per cent of those who had read it admitted that 'either some or all of the information given in it was new to them'.[85] The press advertisements were clearly filling important gaps in public knowledge. (A second Mass-Observation survey, conducted in March 1943 after the publication of the first

[81] *Newspaper World*, 6 Mar. 1943, p. 15; *Daily Mirror*, 5 Mar. 1943, p. 4; *Times*, 2 Mar. 1943, p. 2.
[82] *News of the World*, 7 Mar. 1943, p. 8; *Daily Mail*, 5 Mar. 1943, 4.
[83] *Newspaper World*, 3 Apr. 1943, p. 11.
[84] Minutes of third meeting of JCVD, 10 Aug. 1943.
[85] Wartime Social Survey Inquiry 18 Mar. to 17 Apr. 1943, NA, RG/23/38.

adverts in the press, had discovered that 61 per cent of respondents approved either strongly or moderately of the campaign, but this survey counted as 'disapproving' those who felt the advertisements were insufficiently explicit).[86] By October 1943, the CCHE had received over 66,000 letters from the public in response to the adverts, and there were thousands of requests for the sex education pamphlets it produced.[87] The joint committee recommended 'that efforts be made to persuade the Press to devote more space to the subject through the medium of news articles etc. in addition to continuing the present paid advertisement campaign'.[88] There is little evidence that such pressure bore fruit, however: most editors believed that they were devoting enough space to this subject in papers that were severely restricted due to newsprint rationing. It was left to the *Daily Mirror* to publicize an issue that it had become closely associated with.

VI

The Labour peer and naval commander Lord Winster expressed his hope in 1943 'that one good effect' of the war would be 'to dispel the unhealthy atmosphere of fear, mystery and hypocrisy which has cloaked the venereal diseases for so long'.[89] Newspaper publicity alone certainly was not able to do that, but between them the *Daily Mirror* and the Ministry of Health at least ensured that the press provided a far greater amount of information about sexual health than during the First World War, and contributed to the education of a confused and curious audience. The substantial increase in the space devoted to venereal diseases in the mainstream media of the 1940s reflected a significant shift in attitudes to the public discussion of sex over the first half of the century. The widespread anxiety in official, professional and media circles that knowledge of contraception, prophylaxis, and sexuality in general among the working classes would encourage promiscuity and 'immorality' was gradually being eroded. Being sexually informed – and by extension, sexually responsible – was coming to be seen as an essential part of modern citizenship, for both men and women.[90] 'With the co-operation of the public we could reduce the incidence of these diseases enormously', observed Sir Wilson Jameson in his radio broadcast on venereal infections, 'but the public have difficulty in co-operating because of the extraordinary policy of secrecy that has been maintained regarding this particular subject'.[91] Breaking down this secrecy was vital for both citizen and nation, and it

[86] Mass-Observation file report 1633, Mar. 1943.

[87] CCHE, VD publicity campaign, medical adviser's correspondence, Oct. 1943, NA, HO/45/25599; minutes of third meeting of JCVD, 10 Aug. 1943.

[88] Ibid., minutes of fourth meeting of JCVD, 18 Aug. 1943.

[89] Davenport-Hines, *Sex, death and punishment*, p. 272.

[90] As Sonya Rose has argued, those who transgressed notions of sexual responsibility were criticized for failing to be 'good citizens': 'Sex, citizenship and nation'.

[91] Goodman, *Wilson Jameson*, p. 193.

is notable that the wartime concern about venereal diseases prompted the establishment of an investigation by Her Majesty's Inspectorate into the provision of sex education, which resulted in the first guidance from central government on the subject for schools and youth organizations.[92] In the years immediately after 1945 sex education programmes received a string of endorsements from public bodies such as the Ministry of Education, the London County Council, and the National Union of Teachers.[93] More generally, policy-makers placed an increasing emphasis on educating the public about health matters.[94] These shifts were one aspect of the growing tendency to conceive of the role of government in terms of informing, and collaborating with, an active citizenry – a notion prominent in the Beveridge Report, widely discussed at the time of the venereal diseases campaign.

The editorial team at the *Mirror* was perceptive enough to recognize the popular hunger for information about sex and to feed it as part of a high-minded campaign of education. 'It is a sin on the part of good people to remain ignorant, indifferent or complacent on this subject', one editorial argued, 'It is everybody's duty to take a hand in the fight.'[95] Of course the paper was not purely motivated by altruism – it used the issue to cultivate its growing reputation as a radical, outspoken paper of the people – but many of the staff did have an idealistic desire to challenge the prudery identified by Jameson. The campaign was regarded as an 'immense success' by Cecil King and Harry Bartholomew, and soon acquired a central place in the growing mythology of the *Mirror*.[96] When Sylvester Bolam took over as editor of the *Mirror* in 1948, the wartime venereal diseases crusade was one of two examples used in a front-page statement championing the benefits of sensationalism.[97] Hugh Cudlipp devoted a short chapter to it in his half-centenary history of the paper in 1953.[98] This critical and commercial triumph provided a powerful impetus for both the *Mirror* and the *Sunday Pictorial* to extend their efforts to open up the discussion of sex in the years after the war. Cudlipp, returning to the editorship of the *Pictorial* after war-service, was keen to exploit the shift of opinion in favour of sex education for the young. In 1946 he secured the serialization of Grantly Dick-Reid's *The miracle of childbirth*, and the following year the paper reproduced in four parts a rather bolder pamphlet entitled *How a baby is born*.[99] In 1949 Cudlipp made his most ambitious move yet in this field by

[92] J. Hampshire and J. Lewis, '"The ravages of permissiveness": sex education and the permissive society', *Twentieth Century British History*, 15 (2004), p. 294.

[93] Mass-Observation survey of sexual attitudes 1949, reprinted in L. Stanley, *Sex surveyed, 1949–1994* (London, 1995), p. 86.

[94] V. Berridge, *Health and society in Britain since 1939* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 50–1.

[95] *Daily Mirror*, 19 Feb. 1943, p. 3.

[96] Cecil King to Hugh Cudlipp, 25 Nov. 1942; King to Cudlipp, 25 Feb. 1943, Cudlipp papers, HC 2/1.

[97] Cudlipp, *Publish and be damned!*, p. 251.

[98] Ibid., ch. 3.

[99] Cudlipp, *Walking on water*, p. 182; *Sunday Pictorial*, 28 Dec. 1947 to 18 Jan. 1948.

providing Mass-Observation with the funds to conduct an investigation into sex for serialization in the *Pictorial*. The resulting 'Little Kinsey' report was in fact the 'first national random survey of sex to be carried out' and has been described by Liz Stanley as 'one of the most important pieces of British sex research'.[100] Yet these self-conscious attempts to 'speak boldly in advance of conventional ideas' were not always as progressive as the paper suggested. At times both the *Mirror* and the *Pictorial* succumbed to the temptation to pander to popular prejudice rather than carry out its mission to inform. In 1952, for example, Cudlipp's attempts to generate debate about the issue of homosexuality resulted in a lurid series in the *Pictorial* entitled 'Evil men' which crudely stigmatized and stereotyped its subjects rather than offer balanced reporting.[101] The desire to represent the 'voice of the people' could produce intolerant attacks on those who appeared to deviate from the 'norm'.

Yet if the venereal diseases campaign showed that attitudes were changing, in other respects it demonstrated just how slow and limited this process was. The editing of the Ministry of Health's advertisement, and the *Express*'s refusal to carry it at all, underlined the resilience in some quarters of the belief that the public could not be trusted with information about sex. Some words and phrases were invested with such fearful associations – 'pox', 'clap', 'sex organs' – that their mere presence in a 'family newspaper' seemed dangerous. 'The *Mirror* was full of words I'd rather not have to read in a public thing like a paper', complained one woman to Mass-Observation, and many in Fleet Street agreed.[102] The fear surrounding venereal diseases were certainly not swept away by the wartime publicity. Once the war was over, moreover, it was difficult to maintain the sense of urgency about this issue. There was a steady fall in the rate of syphilis infections after 1946, with fewer than 1,000 new cases recorded in 1955.[103] By the late 1950s, however, new cases of gonorrhoea started to rise again. 'A whole generation of teenagers has grown up not knowing that venereal disease can be picked up during casual sexual intercourse', declared the *Pictorial* in 1958. 'These are the youngsters who were too young to have known about the frank and violent government and newspaper campaign that swept away taboos and scotched the war-time VD plague in 1943.'[104] Without the impetus provided by the sense of wartime crisis, governments and local authorities were reluctant to provide substantial, long-term investment in treatment and education programmes, and consequently the 'return of VD' became a standard media scare story in the second half of the century. In 1970, for example, Marjorie Proops was still demanding in the *Mirror* that 'It is time we stopped whispering about VD.'[105] The emergence of AIDS in the 1980s reinvigorated many of the fears about sex,

[100] Stanley, *Sex surveyed*, 3–4; *Sunday Pictorial*, 3–31 July 1949.
[101] *Sunday Pictorial*, 18 May 1952–8 June 1952.
[102] Mass-Observation file report 1633, Mar. 1943, p. 9.
[103] Hall, *Sex, gender and social change*, p. 160.
[104] *Sunday Pictorial*, 16 Nov. 1958, p. 8.
[105] *Daily Mirror*, 19 Nov. 1970, p. 1.

disease, and punishment, with much of the tabloid coverage – the *Sun* labelled AIDS as a 'gay plague' – displaying considerable hostility and suspicion.[106] Newspaper debates in 2004 about what had become known as sexually transmitted infections dwelt on very familiar themes of ignorance, permissiveness, and guilt. If the Second World War venereal diseases campaign marks an important turning-point in the public discussion of sexual health, it was unable to fulfil the hopes of Lord Winster and sweep away the 'fear, mystery, and hypocrisy' surrounding the subject.

[106] Davenport-Hines, *Sex, death and punishment*, ch. 9.